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ABSTRACT

This concept paper presents a model for developing a more unified student-centered system of education to meet all students' educational needs in New York City Public Schools. It is intended to promote thinking and discussion on the educational needs of students with handicapping conditions within the larger general education system. General parameters for merging special education staff expertise and procedures into the total school community are described, calling for broadening of staff roles and shared responsibility for meeting student needs. A continuum of intervention levels is outlined, beginning with the classroom teacher who tries an array of strategies for meeting learning needs and moving through several stages to special education placement. Also described are the responsibilities of the school district and Committees on Special Education. Several concerns which must be addressed in implementing such a model are discussed, including: organization, training, management information, standards and accountability, and incentives/disincentives. (JDD)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION AND A CHANGING SCHOOL POLICY

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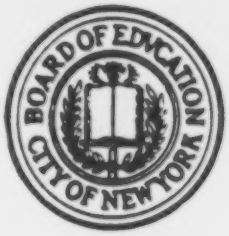

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SPECIAL EDUCATION AND A CHANGING SCHOOL POLICY

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND A CHANGING SCHOOL POLICY

Preface

Special Education and a Changing School Policy was disseminated as a draft concept paper in April, 1989. It generated much discussion on the future of special education in New York City Public Schools, especially within the larger context of general education and school-based leadership. Professionals and staff members throughout the school system reviewed the draft and provided comments and ideas. Many agreed that the goal of moving toward a more unified student-centered system was needed and worthwhile. However, they also noted that the implementation of such a system would require the concerted effort of the entire school system, including parents and constituency groups supporting students and school employees.

Overview

This brief concept paper is intended to promote thinking and discussion on key elements for better addressing the educational needs of students with handicapping conditions within the larger general education system. It is advanced in the conviction that the school system, in its move toward school-based leadership, is ready and willing to reshape its schools to better serve all students.

Although the students in special education programs are the Division's primary concern, they must be viewed in the context of the total school community. The needs of students do not always correspond to our organizational distinctions, and today's

general education student with unaddressed needs may be tomorrow's special education student.

Recent policy planning initiatives share critical elements concerning the way a school is organized and resources used to deliver effective services. From the Division of Special Education perspective, a school's organization and operation is an essential concern. If the initiatives described in this concept paper are to be successfully implemented, a comprehensive redefinition of staff roles and responsibilities at all levels of the system is needed.

The first essential is to recognize the similarities between "special" and "general" education, and not just the differences. School staff roles must be viewed collectively in relation to the needs of all students, rather than to discrete groups of students. A collaborative spirit among school community's members will enrich the larger enterprise, and will better enable each student to achieve and succeed.

Assumptions

The school must be responsible, and held accountable, for developing every student's full potential. If problems develop in fulfilling that responsibility, the school should look first toward facilitating the teacher's ability to meet the student's needs; second, toward improving the school environment; third, toward addressing family and social constraints on the student's performance; and finally, toward possible skill deficits or handicapping conditions which may impede the student. Too often, the practice is to look first and last to the student as the source of the problem.

The entire school community must be responsible, and held accountable, for resolving identified problems, and collectively shares in the process and success of that resolution. However, accountability must be defined with clear goals, concrete expectations, and expanded staff roles and responsibilities that will make it possible to deliver services in a different way to students, including students in special education programs and those who are "at risk" of failure, underachievement, or referral.

Roles and Responsibilities

School Level

The following describes general parameters for merging special education staff expertise and procedures into the total school community. However, it is based on implicit assumptions about the ways in which that larger community will change in a school-based leadership environment. A brief description of those assumptions would therefore be helpful.

School-based leadership permits a particular school to redefine its goals and services to better meet student and school needs. It is foremost a "people" process, empowering school staff to assume new decision making roles and responsibilities, and imparting a new sense of individuality, importance, and freedom. The student's difficulty becomes the school's shared problem, and the school community unites to resolve that problem.

The roles of school staff broaden when responsibility for meeting student needs and achieving school success is shared. Roles and responsibilities for school professionals and support staff should evolve, in large part, from each school's unique

problems and resources, and its plan for responding to the needs of students within the context of district and system-wide goals and standards.

In addition to district and system-wide goals, each school should develop standards of excellence by which students would be measured and overall school performance determined. With carefully planned oversight and monitoring, successful schools would be given greater latitude in making decisions and using resources. Unsuccessful schools would receive the support and technical assistance they need to achieve success.

The first level of responsibility for addressing a student's learning needs lies with the teacher, who would be expected to try different strategies for meeting those needs. Those strategies might include educational management techniques, adaptation of instructional materials and/or methods, classroom reorganization, diagnostic tests, conferences with the child and parent, or other interventions.

If the teacher is unable to meet the student's needs, he/she would seek "ad hoc" collegial support from other professionals in the school. Each teacher should be part of a collegial problem-sharing and problem-solving system which fosters case conferencing with colleagues and other school personnel. A teacher might seek assistance from any school or district resource such as a nurse, bilingual specialist, counselor or social worker, psychologist, librarian, or educational diagnostician. Teachers would be specifically encouraged to seek help from special education staff who have traditionally been accessible only through formal referral.

If that level of intervention fails to resolve the problem, responsibility would pass to a Student Support Team (the names of collegial structures may differ from school to school, e.g., Teacher Assistance Teams, Pupil Personnel Teams, or other school staff

configurations). This Team would more formally and systematically explore possible causes of the problem, and identify needed services such as remediation; preventive general or alternative education programs; bilingual services; psychological, social, or guidance counseling services; community services; or health intervention services. The Student Support Team would ideally include one or more special education staff, particularly an educational diagnostician.

If none of these interventions were successful, or if a student's needs were so severe that they warranted immediate action, formal referral would be made to a School Support Team (similar to the current School Based Support Team). It is both a structure for formal assessment and a collection of individual staff resources available to the school community.

The referral would document prior efforts to resolve the problem by the teacher and the Student Support Team. A parent/guardian referral would be deemed a request for evaluation, and might be referred to one of the other levels for review prior to formal assessment.* These prior efforts would reduce the scope, time required, and cost of formal assessment.

The Team's first responsibility would be to ensure that all appropriate action short of formal assessment has taken place. For that and other purposes, the Team could access appropriate school staff. The Team would then initiate a child-based assessment, including diagnostic tests not already performed at other levels (vocational assessment, native language testing, psychiatric, or other medical specialty examination, etc.).

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*regulatory change may be required

Assessment results, in conjunction with other evaluative criteria (situational assessment, curriculum mastery, observation in a variety of settings, etc.), would help determine whether and what kind of special education services were needed. The emphasis of the assessment would be on identifying ways to solve the problem by accessing school, family, and community services. The School Support Team would also make better use of the wealth of assessment information available. For example, the assessment process might yield information on instructional materials and teaching techniques to address the student's needs, which could be shared with the teacher, thereby avoiding special education placement.

If general education services were identified to meet the student's needs, a case manager would be assigned to monitor the adequacy of those services. If special education placement were indicated, the Team would develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) insuring the least restrictive services possible, with mainstreaming and integration with age-appropriate general education students as a primary goal. In a system encouraging school-based leadership, the expansion of decision-making responsibilites by the School Support Team might also include program recommendations for some self contained special education programs (i.e., Modified Instructional Services I and II). This change would ensure that all due process rights and Committee on Special Education oversight practices, as currently performed for the initiation or termination of resource room services, related services, and mainstreaming are provided. If a waiver from State Education Department regulations could be obtained, schools could design individual cascades of special education services, building on school resources and student goals. In such a model, greater decision-making responsibilities would be placed on school staff to use resources more

flexibly. The focus would be shifted from monitoring process to demonstrating school success as measured by outcomes for all students.

A school-based special education system is dependent on reorganizing the school to redefine the roles of all staff. While the structure might be different than the one described above, a unified structure of some kind is essential. Special education staff have an important role to play in helping to assure success for all students, whether or not they participate in special education programs.

The roles of School Support Team members must be carefully defined. Collectively, they must continue to carry out legally-mandated assessment functions. However, as individuals they are members of the school community with specialized knowledge and skills which can further the school's mission, and enable other school professionals to meet the needs of individual students more effectively. For example:

- the educational diagnostician can consult with teachers; make classroom observations; informally test students identified by a teacher as having difficulties; and recommend curriculum adaptations, instructional methods, and classroom management strategies;

- the school psychologist can assist a teacher in addressing the source of a student's behavioral problems; informally assess the student; and recommend overall teaching and classroom management strategies, as well as support services, to resolve behavioral problems;

- the school social worker can work with the teacher to identify and address a student's family problems; confer with families and identify needed community resources; and refer students to social services if necessary (e.g., abuse and neglect cases).

Other special education personnel can similarly strengthen the school community. For example, speech and language teachers can assist teachers to remediate mild speech and language problems.

District/Committee on Special Education Level

The Community or High School District is responsible for insuring that schools carry out an effective child-based program, and that special education services are available in every school which needs them. The district would allocate human, fiscal, and physical resources to meet that goal; advocate on behalf of school needs; approve and monitor the school-based leadership plan; and provide technical assistance and training to further the success of each school.

While Districts have wide latitude for carrying out that responsibility, Committees on Special Education (CSEs) have more precise responsibilities defined by court mandates and State Regulations. They are responsible for timely and appropriate assessment and disposition at the school level, timely completion of the Phase I-IEP and reevaluations or triennial reviews by schools, and other critical duties. Foremost among their responsibilities is the recommendation of special education services in the least restrictive environment. As schools move toward a more unified -- and unitary -- system of services, CSEs must be thoroughly familiar with individual school programs and services. In addition to home proximity and functional grouping, placement decisions would take into account a school's range, integration, and diversification of services as well as its demonstrated performance.

CSEs must maintain safeguards ensuring due process rights and timely access to appropriate instructional programs, but they must also go beyond process to insure accountable, individualized evaluations of students' needs. Monitors would continue to review that process.

Implications

In implementing such a Model, a variety of other concerns must be addressed. They are briefly discussed below.

Organization

The development of a unified, school-based system has many organizational implications for the Division of Special Education in terms of central administration/oversight and the operation of Citywide Programs. All Division functions should be reexamined, with the goal of integrating all but highly specialized functions with the larger system. It is likely that the redesigned Division would concentrate on:

- adequate support to a unified system, including management information identifying system-level and district-level patterns of service, etc. in more meaningful terms than aggregate numbers; tracking initiatives in the system and around the country and sharing that information appropriately; and planning, including the integration of data-defined trend analysis, conceptual initiatives, related system-wide developments, policy definitions, and other information into proposals and programs which generate continued institutional renewal;

- student-level, school-level, and district/city-wide level evaluation of the degree to which each student's needs are being met, including assessing the effectiveness of remediation and prevention programs in enabling students at risk to reach their full potential; the appropriateness of IEPs, and the extent to which IEP goals have been met; and more aggressive review of costly non-public programs;

- technical assistance to insure effective operation of a decentralized, unified system, including training staff within and outside the Division to carry out flexible roles and responsibilities; disseminating information about program models, curricula, implications of unusual handicapping conditions, etc.; assisting with resolving space, equipment, and other environmental problems; and identifying fiscal and other resource opportunities, and helping to develop proposal-writing and other capabilities to take advantage of them;

- educational training programs for parents on special education programs and services, due process rights, child development, behavior management, and effective parenting skills.

It is likely that Divisional operations (e.g., personnel, budget, fiscal, compliance, etc.) would also be affected by these system-wide changes. In particular, operational functions might be reduced and/or transferred. The goal would be to create a "lean and mean" Division, smaller but better.

Training

Implicit in this system is a restructuring of the school staff roles and responsibilities to break down traditional barriers between general and special education, and between job descriptions. While teachers will still teach, and counselors counsel, they will perceive themselves as members of a school community with a common purpose of developing every child's potential. Each can make a distinctive contribution to achieving that child-based purpose. The Division would have a particular responsibility to train special education staff to perceive themselves as members of the school community, while still fulfilling their specialized responsibilities and mandates.

Training will also be required for the Division's central staff to help them focus on support and oversight, and in particular, to move beyond compliance processing to the support of school-based leadership.

Management Information

An effective special education management information system is needed at all levels to support effective school-based leadership. For example:

- the school principal needs timely and accessible aggregate information, such as the source of referrals (teacher, family, etc.), suspected handicapping condition, age at referral, and other relevant information (e.g., ethnicity, primary language) in order to identify gaps in service, projected service needs, and sources of over-referral;

- the superintendent needs similar school-and district-specific aggregate information in a convenient format to identify possible problems (e.g., excessive or inappropriate referrals) and to plan for changing personnel, space, and resource needs;

- the Division needs aggregated time-comparative information not only to insure processing compliance, but also to identify changing service needs, project future special education population trends, and identify possible excessive or inappropriate referrals, particularly with respect to differential referrals, placements, and levels of service among ethnic and language groups.

The Division collects a wealth of data, its computer systems have flexible reporting capacities. Organizing and sharing this data in a meaningful and timely fashion should further the integration of services at the school level, and lead to more efficient and cost-effective use of resources.

Standards and Accountability

In such a structure, who is accountable for a student's outcomes? The first level of accountability is the Chancellor, acting through his staff, who sets performance and curriculum standards to encourage successful outcomes. The next level of accountability is the community or high school district, which should set additional standards for content and/or performance.

The ultimate level of accountability lies with the school, which should set specific content and performance standards for school staff and organize them to best meet those standards. School staff must perceive themselves as individually and collectively accountable for the success of every student.

Accountability also requires objective methods for determining that standards have been met, and a means of evaluating the consistency of the process in order to meet legal and regulatory requirements. That is particularly important to the Division of Special Education. Reliance on reading test scores for a public measure of school performance creates an incentive to over-refer students to special education, so that remedial resources can be concentrated on children near the norm.

Standards of achievement for special education students also need to be expanded to yield student-specific reportable data comparable to all students. Those standards might include performance in reading, writing, mathematics, content subject areas, and social independence; graduation and completion rates; attendance and retention rates; articulation from school to school; referrals, certifications, and decertifications for special education; least restrictive movement and mainstreaming within special education; movement through levels of bilingual services; post-secondary outcomes; and middle and high school drop-out rates.

Related to the issue of standards is a need for a review of the current testing program and its use for providing pertinent information for improving the quality and type of instruction provided to all students. Recent criticism of standardized testing programs has focused on the political and practical considerations that undermine important learning outcomes (Shepard, 1989). Testing should provide teachers with critical information on what a student has and has not learned. The de-emphasis of

testing as a measure of school and system-wide accountability can lead to improved instruction based on child-centered rather than system-centered learning objectives.

The de-emphasis of testing is of critical importance for students whose first language is not English, whose progress in basic learning is often obscured because they may have difficulty completing standardized tests in English. All of these concerns about incomplete accountability for learning have an impact on special education, since students whose progress is inadequately measured often slide into special education placement which might have been unnecessary if their learning deficits had been appropriately identified and addressed earlier.

Incentives/Disincentives

Direct and indirect impediments exist, both within the school system and imposed by Federal and State regulations, contracts, and court mandates, to effective implementation of school-based leadership. While this concept paper does not permit exploring them in detail, an opportunity to create internal incentives and obtain waivers for external impediments might be considered. These impediments include:

1. Fiscal: The problems surrounding a student's ability to learn are many and complex. The school's solutions to those problems tend to be categorical, rigid, and focused on the child as the source of difficulty.

There are many reasons for this response, among them culture-influenced differential expectations, imperfect or inadequate diagnostic methods, lack of a full range of services, etc. However, a primary reason for labelling children in response to learning difficulties is the maze of funding sources for discrete purposes, each with precise regulations, which drive both the ways in which the school provides services

and the ways in which a child is assigned to, and retained in, service modes. These effects are of particular concern to the Division of Special Education, because it is likely that they result in special education over-referral and over-retention.

A student who has difficulty achieving in the classroom may be referred to special education because the teacher genuinely wants the student to receive needed services and believes that the school's remedial programs will not meet the student's needs. Similarly, many remedial programs are organized on a pull-out mode to satisfy funding requirements. The student who is pulled out misses the instruction available to classmates, and may fall farther and farther behind - resulting in endless remediation or worse, avoidable special education referral.

The same impediments exist in special education, which provides funding based on mode of service delivery, rather than the student's individual needs. For example, a student in a self contained program (e.g., Modified Instructional Services I) is excluded from the services of a consultant teacher if mainstreamed. Schools also risk losing funds if mainstreaming exceeds certain thresholds.

Too often, these constraints result in services which are:

- not appropriate or effective for the student
- an inefficient use of a school's space and staff resources
- costly and duplicative
- labelling and destructive of self-esteem
- perpetuating, or worse, aggravating the student's problem.

Many of these problems result from efforts to insure that students receive effective services, to avoid supplanting existing resources, and to construct an audit trail. These are appropriate concerns, and efforts to address the problem must take them into

account. Funding constraints must be minimized in a way which assures fiscal accountability as well as successful outcomes for students.

A unified, student-focused school is impacted both by remedial and special education funding constraints. Current Board efforts to address the problems with compensatory and remedial funding is critical to the success of school-based leadership. However, those efforts should be expanded to include a review of special education program and funding constraints, such as:

- funding-related difficulties in designing comprehensive services (e.g., bilingual education programs, in-class services, mainstreaming with supportive services);
- funding-related size limitations on service delivery (e.g., student-teacher-paraprofessional ratios);
- minimum service levels (e.g., 2 hours of Consultant Teacher Services per week for a student who might require less).

Several models exist which might be appropriate to resolving portions of these funding-related limitations. They might be realizable on a demonstration basis, and a successful demonstration might enhance the Board's ability to obtain approval for implementing them system-wide.

For example, the Edmonds, Washington School District has put into place a different way of looking at special education funding in the Alternative Instructional Services Model (AISM) Project. Funding is based not on the mode of service delivery (staff or program), but on the child's handicapping condition. A student with a given handicapping condition generates a set amount of funds, to be spent in any way the school deems most effective for addressing the student's educational needs. That method encourages flexible, comprehensive, cost-effective, child-centered services.

The AISM Project is a school-based collaborative model for building program improvement through the blending of categorical program resources. The major goal is to develop and implement an integrated special, compensatory, and basic education service delivery model which provides effective instruction to all students within the basic education classroom. The model is designed to increase:

- communication between all building level staff to reduce program isolation;
- basic education staff knowledge, understanding, and ability to provide effective instruction to students with special learning needs;
- utilization of all building resources to meet the needs of all students regardless of special labels and funding categories;
- use of school profiling techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of the total educational program on an annual basis.

The National Center on Education and the Economy recently generated a bolder proposal: To Secure Our Future: The Federal Role in Education, 1989. Briefly, it advocates waivers to permit pooling of most Federal education funds (Chapter I, special education, bilingual education, magnet schools) as well as similar state funds, in exchange for a commitment by the local district to realize ambitious goals that they considered attainable in the absence of constraining rules and regulations. That proposal expands on new flexibility available under Chapter I school-wide projects, which permit schools to undertake many different strategies to help individual students by improving the school as a whole.

The needs of students would also be better served by reviewing the current methods used to conduct initial assessments and triennial evaluations, a recommendation of the Beattie Commission on Special Education (Special Education: A Call for Quality, 1985). Shifting the focus of assessment to a curriculum-based

approach emphasizing student observation in the classroom, consultation with teachers, and the linkage of assessment to instruction may improve program decisions and provide classroom teachers with more meaningful information related to the instructional needs of students.

The implementation of Chapter I schoolwide projects does not require waivers. However, it does require effective technical assistance to enable eligible schools, accustomed to current fragmentation, to take advantage of current resources. In addition, a review of the implications of schoolwide projects for special education students should be undertaken immediately.

2. Regulatory and Contractual: Impediments may exist for broadened professional responsibilities. For example, teacher and paraprofessional contracts may make consultation and collaboration difficult. Similarly, special education teacher certification requirements might be waived or modified to permit a general education teacher to consult as well as provide direct service in special education, or vice versa.

3. Staff Incentives: There are few rewards for effective performance. The development of positive incentives should be encouraged. On a school level, they might include rewards for effective teaching such as sabbaticals, promotions, gifts such as plaques, attendance at conferences, etc. They should be developed by the school staff, but an incentive fund would facilitate such rewards. It is essential that effective performance by special education staff be considered in providing incentives.

Districts should also be encouraged to develop additional incentives for schools which demonstrate exceptional performance, such as a small development fund, public recognition, increased autonomy, or other rewards.

Conclusion

As a system, we are approaching a unique consensus on the goal of achieving accountable school-based leadership. That goal is not only compatible with Division of Special Education mandates and priorities, it is essential to the school system's movement toward school-based leadership. This rare opportunity for systemic change must be addressed with boldness, energy, creativity, and common purpose. The trust which parents and society have placed in us demands no less.

CONCEPT PAPER

New York City Board of Education
Division of Special Education

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